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The CIA: What Have Three Decades Wrought?

THE MAN WHO KEPT THE SECRETS
Richard Helms and the CIA

By Thomas Powers
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Reviewed by Angelo Codevilla

The dust jacket of this book reads in part: "in portraying Helms' extraordinary career . . . Thomas Powers has in fact written the first comprehensive inside history of the CIA itself."

This is not quite accurate. A biography of a public servant should above all measure the subject against the jobs he held: Did he do them well? Were his characteristics such that, if they were emulated, the nation would benefit? On the other hand, the history of an agency above all should measure its performance against its task.

While this book tells much that is worth knowing about Richard Helms, some of his co-workers, the CIA and the foreign policy they served, it is neither history nor biography, but rather a good set of jotted notes for both. The author flits from subject to subject—from personage X to operation Y to personage A—without dealing with any of them comprehensively, and without any evident pattern for his choices of subjects.

Nevertheless, the book is well worth reading. It is the notebook of a perceptive journalist who looks at intelligence with a minimum of prejudice and who, if he does not lay out theses and document conclusions, usually spreads enough facts to point the reader in interesting directions.

One of the standard charges leveled by knowledgeable persons against high officials of the CIA is that they are concerned less about getting accurate intelligence and more about making sure that Washington adopts their "line" regarding foreign situations. Powers does not take this charge up directly, but the following passage about Frank Wisner is typical: "Incoming paper might be a foot deep on his desk

. . . but Wisner would neglect it all if he noticed a wrongheaded column by Scotty Reston in the morning's *Times*. Nothing took precedence over getting Reston straightened out."

Where individual operations or episodes are concerned, the author does make explicit judgments. For example, he perceptively blames the failure of the CIA's operation against Sukarno on everything "from confusion about aims and a bad estimate of clients, to a fatal caution about striking to kill, if you're going to strike at all."

Nor is Powers shy in casting judgments on important matters. In less than two pages he mentions that there was a conflict between James Angleton, Chief of the Counterintelligence Staff, and William Colby, DCI, and concludes that "He [Colby] simply made up his mind there was no profit in this, and chucked it impatiently aside in the spirit of Samuel Johnson, who kicked a stone and said 'Thus I refute Berkeley.' In short, William Colby junked counterintelligence."

This is an accurate interpretation, which is supported by knowledgeable former agency officials: The Director of Central Intelligence *did away with* counterintelligence. Yet, Powers is silent about what this implies for the CIA, for the United States, or what it says for Colby. He shifts to another subject, leaving some ominous questions hanging. To do away with counterintelligence is to leave the nation naked. Without counterintelligence, an intelligence agency may still do some good, but only by the grace of God. Such serious matters demand more serious treatment than they receive here.

The book is by no means uniformly perceptive or free of prejudice. One notes that Powers accepts uncritically the standard CIA description of the agent's relationship to his case officer. The former is supposed to be wholly de-

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pendent on the latter psychologically. He is supposed to be willing to risk all for something he knows nothing about. It is hard to tell how a notion so repugnant to common sense and to experience came to be so widely accepted, and surprising that Powers did not ask how it could be put into practice—given that case officers are petty bureaucrats, while agents are usually made of sterner stuff. At any rate, while history abounds with people who endured pain and death for God, country, love, hate, money, sex, etc., it is difficult to imagine the CIA having much success in asking people to risk their lives on the basis of Dale Carnegie's techniques.

Moreover, Powers still carries the burden of ritual liberalism. Why else would he describe Jacobo Arbenz, whose overthrow the CIA engineered in 1954, as one "who was guilty of the cardinal sins of legalizing the Guatemalan Communist Party . . . and of expropriating nearly 400,000 acres of idle banana plantation owned by the United Fruit Company." Just a little research is enough to convince fair-minded observers that Arbenz's movement had been taken over by the Communist Party. There is no reason to believe that the Communists would not have done to Guatemala what they did to Cuba. One could argue that the United States should have allowed it to occur. But one is not free to dismiss with a snide remark the dangers which such movements bode for the United States.

Let us now consider what one can learn from Powers' evidence concerning two crucial questions: Does the CIA report intelligence to policymakers in a fair, unbiased manner? Is the CIA up to the task of covertly influencing world events in the United States' favor?

Let us take the latter question first. Powers devotes more space to covert action than to any other subject. (Because of this concentration the book says very little about the CIA's main function, the one which Powers says was Helms' main job: the collection of intelligence.) As a result, however, Powers sheds more light on this matter than the Church Committee report.

Powers' verdict in case after case is the same. The CIA's covert action has been a half-baked thing. In the early years, when the United States' reputation for success was high, people around the world vied for the privilege of cooperating clandestinely with the Americans against Communist regimes, parties and sympathizers. Faith was such in those days that

Ukrainians, Germans, Laotians and Hungarians would continue to cooperate even after some of their brethren had died trying.

Powers' conclusion is that the United States *abandoned* the field of political and paramilitary warfare. "Americans" he says, "when it came down to it were not willing to wage war in order to liberate Eastern Europe. . . . They were unwilling to encourage the émigrés to undertake a twenty-year struggle of the sort the North Vietnamese conducted against the French and the Americans." He tells the pathetic story of Ukrainians trained by the CIA, and abandoned by the United States, confined to caves deep in the Carpathians, still risking their lives to send out reports as Americans in Washington waited for them to be killed. He tells of the Meo nation, one hundred thousand strong, who, at the CIA's bidding, held the northwest corner of Indochina for a decade, and only one-tenth of whom survives in squalor in Thai refugee camps. And he mentions the bitter words of Mrs. Ewa Shadrin, whose husband, with whom she had fled the Soviet Union, reportedly disappeared while being carelessly "run" as a double agent by the CIA. Since his disappearance, the CIA has apparently succeeded in hushing up the matter. Authorities in Sweden, where the Shadrins first escaped from Russia, had warned them that the Americans would use them and then throw them away.

Powers appears much affected by such matters. Yet, he chalks them all up to the "harsh and cynical reality of international relations." But this is not just superficial. It is dangerously myopic to confuse the harshness, cynicism and betrayal that are part of purposeful, successful plans of action, and the harshness, cynicism and betrayal which the improvident commit willy-nilly as they stumble from defeat to defeat. The former does not engender the massive, deadly rejection and contempt which have fallen upon the United States' retail Machiavellism and wholesale naiveté.

Although Powers never explains why the United States has behaved thus, his reporting on the Kennedy Administration's approach to Castro's Cuba shows just *how* operations undertaken with a half-will and a quarter-moral commitment end in impotence and betrayal. In the course of final planning for the exiles' invasion of Cuba, Kennedy personally delivered three major blows to the plan. First he shifted the

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site from a populated area to the swampy wilderness of the Bay of Pigs. Second, he cut down the size of the essential air strike from 45 sorties to 16. Third, he cancelled 8 of these 16 at the last moment. Why did Kennedy debilitate the invasion plan in this fashion? In Powers' view "He was more alarmed . . . by the possibility of a noisy success than by the prospect of a quiet failure, failing to see that failure itself is the noisiest thing of all." In short, Kennedy wanted success, but he did not want to pay for it. The CIA, for its part, did not refuse to go through motions it knew would be disastrous.

Later, a furious Kennedy pushed the CIA to "get rid of Castro." The Agency dutifully thought up schemes. Yet, it "could come up with no plan for Castro's overthrow which would not require overt American intervention for the final blow. This Kennedy would not approve." So the infamous assassination plots spilled pools of ink, because the plotters could not stand in front of one another and assert that they were justified in doing the things they were plotting. They could not conceive of trying to explain to the American people, in case the whole matter surfaced, where right lay.

The fairness of the CIA's reporting of intelligence has been challenged over the years. Powers mentions how important it is, whenever and wherever policy is being argued, that at least one person should be present whose sole commitment is to the facts. He points out that the CIA is supposed to supply such persons for the higher councils of government. Then he cites instance after instance in which the CIA stood up for itself, for the President, for inter-agency harmony—for everything *but* the facts.

Persons familiar with National Intelligence Estimates—documents every line in which is argued over at countless interagency meetings—claim that they often contain elementary errors of fact, and wonder what people argue about at those meetings. Powers tells of the time President Johnson let it be known that he wanted an estimate of enemy strength in Vietnam. Richard Helms convened a meeting of the Board of National Estimates, instructing it "to reach agreement—no footnotes." The bargaining which took place had no connection with the facts in Southeast Asia, but flowed directly from the bureaucratic facts in Washington. In the end, Powers says, Helms signed a National Intelligence Estimate (14.3.67) containing the

military's figures, which he *knew* to be false, "and the reason he did so is that he did not want a fight with the military, supported by Rostow at the White House."

A sidelight in the matter of the Vietnam estimates illuminates yet another difficulty: As the CIA's leadership repudiated the Agency's own figures—which it *knew* to be correct—it also turned on their author, an analyst named Adams, who had the temerity to insist on the facts. The CIA brass discovered some flaws in his character, which unfortunately kept his solid analytical talents from being as useful to the Agency as they could be. He had committed the unforgivable sin of breaking ranks.

Suffering for being right is not uncommon at the CIA. Even a Director, John McCone, saw his career wrecked for being proven right about the presence of Soviet IRBMs in Cuba in 1962. The CIA's Board of National Estimates, under the very prestigious Mr. Sherman Kent, had said that the Soviets simply would not do anything so uncharacteristic, provocative and unrewarding. The President had believed it. What were both to do with a man who had been right and would remind them of their error? He had to go. Being right endows one with a source of support that is independent of the bureaucracy. One who errs is more dependent, and therefore more useful than ever. That is why bureaucracies accommodate error more easily than truth.

Further confirmation is provided by the case of Paul Walsh, a CIA analyst who developed a method for calculating the amount of military supplies flowing through the port of Sihanoukville. His "facts" argued against the invasion of Cambodia. It took place, and provided evidence that Walsh's figures were low by a factor of three. Moreover, it was learned that Walsh had disregarded evidence which contradicted his thesis. But Walsh was a loyal company man. So when Richard Helms appointed a committee to investigate the discrepancy between the facts and the estimates, he put Walsh at its head.

What then does the book say about Richard Helms? He was the first person to rise to the top from within the CIA. He was its product. Powers suggests that "a willingness to compromise was both Helms' strength and his weakness." He does not elaborate, but clearly means that compromise is necessary to rising in the bureaucracy, but that it means agreeing to

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things one knows are bad for the country for the sake of the "higher good" of agreement. Helms was a bureaucrat. Powers praises him for being "pragmatic and for refusing to 'get into the soggy mass of morality'."

This comment bespeaks a failure (in both the author and his subject) to recognize the primary feature of democratic politics. That "soggy mass" is actually the foundation of all power in this country. Rather, the rule of Helms' life is expressed in the language that passes for profundity in Washington: "I only serve one President at a time." He "kept the secrets" and served his Presidents the way they wanted to be served—quite possibly the only way they would have *allowed* themselves to be served. But we will never know about that.

The CIA, too, did and was what its superiors expected it to do and be. Even Frank Church reluctantly recognized that the CIA had done nothing but serve presidents. The burden of Powers' evidence is that although its customers deserved no better, the CIA has served them rather badly. The CIA cannot compete with the Soviets in exercising clandestine influence abroad. For it, the territories of our principal adversaries are denied areas. Its analysts know that loyal error is preferable to disloyal truth. One of its directors found counterintelligence just too inconvenient.

Moreover, it is apparent to any reader of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* that the CIA is riven by warring factions. Powers points out that the "whistle was blown" on Helms, Angleton and on the Agency as a whole not by

a Senator nor by a sleuthing journalist, but by a faction in the CIA itself, intent on laying low its opposition. Security, intelligence, duty, country—in practice all take a back seat to the daily preoccupation with the factional fights. How does one explain such relative lack of concern for the common defense?

Richard Helms expressed dismay at the publicity which the CIA's failures and internecine wars have received. Powers says "... The wholesale betrayals of a Government investigating itself, the unseemly scrambling of officials to protect themselves, and the reduction of an entire generation of public servants to creatures of blame, complaint, convenient lies, and petty animus filled Helms with pain. It made the works of thirty years seem small, trivial, mean and self-serving."

One wonders if Helms or Powers have ever considered whether this scrambling is not the logical, penultimate result of the last thirty years' work by an entire generation of Americans, in the White House, the State Department and the CIA. De Tocqueville warned that pettiness invades a government which gives up concerns with greatness. "Petty, mean, self-serving" are harsh adjectives, but one searches in vain for better ones to describe the work of a generation which began at the tiller of a nation unrivaled in moral, political and military power, and now hangs on grimly to illusion and reputation as disasters loom over the horizon—disasters which their deficiencies have made well nigh inevitable.